DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 273 EC 307 255

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TITLE Social Contexts of Secondary Classrooms and Their Effect on Social Competence and Social Adjustment of Students with Learning Disabilities.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Organization; *Classroom Environment; Foreign Countries; High Schools; *Inclusive Schools; *Interpersonal Competence; *Learning Disabilities; Peer Acceptance; *Special Classes; *Student Attitudes; Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Quebec

ABSTRACT

This study compared the perceptions of 227 ninth- and tenth-grade students with learning disabilities in regular and special secondary classrooms. Students' perceptions of their classroom environment and their social competence were assessed. Results showed that students with learning disabilities perceived regular classes as being better organized and more task-oriented than special classes. Students with learning disabilities in inclusive classes had the same judgment about the classroom environment as regular students. Contrary to expectations, students with learning disabilities in special classes did not perceive of themselves as being less socially competent than the students in regular classes. The study also found that students with learning disabilities in special classes were perceived as being more socially competent by their teachers and were accepted more by their peers than students with learning disabilities in regular classes. Contains 15 references. (Author/CR)

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ED 431 273

Social Contexts of Secondary Classrooms and their Effect on Social Competence and Social Adjustment of Students with Learning Disabilities

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Communication presented at 1999 AERA Annual Meetting, Montreal, Canada

EC 307255

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Abstract

This study compared the perceptions of students with learning disabilities (LD) in regular and special secondary classrooms. Participants in the study were 227 ninth- and tenth-grade LD students. Students' perceptions of their classroom environment and their social competence were assessed. Results showed that regular classes were perceived by LD students as better organized and more task-oriented than special classes. LD students in inclusive classes had the same judgment about the classroom environment as regular students. Contrary to expectations, LD students in special classes did not perceive themselves as less socially competent than LD students in regular classes. LD students in special classes were perceived as more socially competent by their teachers and were accepted more by their peers that LD students in regular classes. The implications of the results are discussed.

Social Contexts of Secondary Classrooms and their Effect on Social Competence and Social Adjustment of Students with Learning Disabilities

The present study investigated the social context of regular and special secondary classroom environments and their effect on LD students' social competence and social adjustment. More specifically, the study focused on the students' perceptions of their classroom environment and their social relationships with peers.

It is well known that social experiences with peers and significant adults (parents or teachers) have an influence on a student's personal development. Social competence deficits during childhood and adolescence may not only have a negative impact on interpersonal relationships in adulthood, but may also reduce the quality and the number of learning experiences to which students are exposed in the school setting (Furnham, 1986). This suggests that a deficit in social competence has harmful effect on learning experiences. Several studies (Bender & Wall, 1994; Bryan, 1997; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Gresham & McMillan, 1997; Sabornie, 1994) have shown that the majority of LD students have social competence deficits and that these problems may result in low academic achievement, dropping out of school as well as social and personal adjustment problems (Parker & Asher, 1987).

It was suggested that regular classes would benefit the social and cognitive development of special students more than special classes (Guralnick, Connor, Hammond, Gottman & Kinnish, 1995; Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995). Similarly, special services would have a negative influence on the social functioning of special students (Guterman, 1995; Meadows, Nell, Scott, & Parker, 1994; Schneider & Leroux, 1994). The regular classes would provide special students with a classroom environment that was more appropriate and stimulating than the special class environment (Saint-Laurent, & Boisclair, 1995; Skrtic, Sailor, & Gee, 1996).

The movement toward school integration is consistent with certain postulates of ecological and developmental perspectives on the quality of school settings. According to these perspectives, a social context that is composed of regular students favors the learning of social behavior, since the presence of regular students provides social models that are more appropriate for special

students than those of the special class context. Thus, a stimulating and rich environment should have a positive effect on special students' social interactions and personal adjustment, although the presence of these students in the regular class is not a guarantee that they will be more accepted by their peers (Merrel & Merz, 1992).

Most studies on the social competence of special students and the organization of services have been conducted with preschool and primary level students. Very few data on this subject are available for the secondary level. In the current context, characterized by a high rate of academic failure and dropping out of school, and by various adjustment problems experienced by youths, there is a need to better understand their school life.

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether or not there are differences in the classroom environment of regular classes and special classes for LD students. This study addressed the following questions (1) Did LD students in regular classes perceive their classroom environment more positively than LD students in special classes? (2) Did LD students in regular classes exhibit a higher level of social competence than LD students in special classes?

Method

Subjects

Participants in the study were 227 ninth- and tenth-grade LD students, aged 13 to 15. The students were in 34 ethnically and socioeconomically homogenous classes in 10 different secondary schools in four Quebec City urban and rural school districts. The number of students per school varied from 430 to 1260. Of the 227 students with LD involved in the study, 115 attended a full-time regular class (22 regular classes) while the other 112 attended a full-time special class (12 special classes).

The sample was divided into two groups: (1) LD students in regular classes, and (2) LD students in special classes. The LD students integrated into the regular classes had the same curriculum and academic schedule as regular students, except for an additional weekly 75-minute period of reading or mathematics, taught by the regular language arts teacher. The mean size of regular classes was 25.30 students and that of special classes was 18.67 students.

Measures

Social Skills Rating Scale - Student's Form: a French adaptation of Gresham and Elliott's (1990) Social Skills Rating Scale was used to assess the students' self-report of their social skills.

Classroom Environment Scale: a 30-item Classroom Environment Scale was used to assess the students' perceptions of the classroom in which social interactions and learning occur. The French version combined two instruments: the Classroom Environment Scale (Moos & Trickett, 1974) and the Learning Environment Inventory (Anderson & Walberg, 1969).

Sociometric Measure: Sociometric assessments were also used to compare students. Peer nominations were obtained by asking students to nominate three peers in their class with whom they like to work, go to a party or do a sports activity and three peers in their class with whom they do not like to work, go to a party or do a sports activity. The social preference scores were calculated by using Coie and Dodge's (1983) method.

The Social Skills Rating Scale - Teacher's Form: a French version of Gresham and Elliott's (1990) Social Skills Rating Scale was used to assess the teachers' rating of the social competence and problem behaviors of their students with learning disabilities.

Results

In order to compare LD students in regular classes with LD students in special classes, a MANCOVA was performed on 13 variables related to the Social Skills, Classroom Environment and Sociometric variables. The Placement effect was tested by using Externalizing and Internalizing scale scores as covariables. Results of the MANCOVA are shown in Table 2.

Placement Effect

A significant effect for placement was obtained, F (13.,205)=7.75; $p<.001$. For students' perception variables, results indicated that the two groups were different. Univariate ANOVAS revealed that scores for the two groups were significantly different for Academic Task ($F(1, 217)=12.05$; $p<.01$), Order/Organization ($F(1, 217)=9.36$; $p<.01$), Social Preference ($F(1, 217)=6.64$; $p<.01$), Cooperation/Teacher ($F(1, 217)=50.77$; $p<.01$), Assertion/Teacher

($F(1, 217)=12.15$; $p<.01$), and Self-Control/Teacher ($F(1, 217)=8.00$; $p<.01$). Means (Table 1) revealed that LD students in regular classes perceived the Academic Task as being more difficult ($m=3.10$) than those in special classes ($m=2.78$). Similarly, LD students in regular classes perceived their class as being better organized and more disciplined ($m=2.31$) than students in special classes ($m=2.03$). Nevertheless, LD students in regular classes were less accepted by their peers ($m=-0.42$) than students in special classes ($m=0.13$).

Significant differences were also obtained for teachers' perceptions. Special education teachers perceived their students as having more social skills than did regular teachers. More precisely means presented at table 1 indicated that special education teachers perceived the LD students as being more cooperative with others ($m=1.58$) than did regular teachers ($m=1.19$). They also perceived LD students as being more assertive in their social relationships ($m=1.03$) than those in regular classes ($m=0.83$). Finally, special education teachers ($m=1.31$) perceived their students as being more in control of themselves than did regular teachers ($m=1.19$).

Discussion

The results reveal that the students in the regular classes had different perceptions of the instruction provided than those in the special classes. LD students perceived regular classes as being more task-oriented than the special classes. This suggests that regular classes offer a greater challenge to LD students than do special classes. These results support previous findings suggesting that regular classes were harder than special classes for LD students (Guterman, 1995; Johnson, Allington, & Afferbach, 1985; Klinder, Vaughn, Schumm, Cohen, & Forgan, 1998; Larrivée, 1989). Results indicated that regular classes were perceived by LD students as being better-organized and more task-oriented than special classes. LD students in inclusive classes had the same perception of the classroom environment as regular students. Contrary to what was expected, LD students in special classes did not perceive themselves as less socially competent than LD students in regular classes. These results may be explained by an unrealistic perception of the social competence of LD students induced by special classes. On the other hand, LD students integrated into regular classes had the same perception of their cooperative, assertion and self-

control skills as regular students, but they perceived themselves as being less empathetic. This dimension seems critical in social functioning because, in regular classes, empathy toward others was significantly associated with a positive peer acceptance. Finally, LD studens in special classes were perceived as more socially competent by their theachers and were more accepted by peers.

Few studies have assessed the effect of the classroom environment on LD students' social competence and social adjustment in a secondary school setting. It is recognized that the classroom environment has an influence on the cognitive and social development of LD students. The results of this study confirm that the characteristics of the classroom environment and the social interactions of LD students cannot be ignored in the services provided. It is suggested that school intervention should focus on this specific social skill, particulary empathy, in order to enhance LD students' social acceptance in regular classes. Furture researches should be carried out in order to better understand the social functioning of LD students in secondary school classrooms. New method of investigation in order to complete the information obtained with sociometric measures and questionnaires on perception. For exemple, the analysis of the social affiliative structure of the class based on the students' observation of cognitive appraisal would allow to acquire a deeper knowledge of the integration of LD students and to better understand the social interactions within classrooms.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Classroom Environment and Social Competence Variables for Placement Effects and Type of Students

	Regular Classroom				Special Classroom	
Measures	Regular students (n=410)		Students with LD (n=115)		Students with LD (n=112)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Classroom Learning Environment						
Teacher-Student Relations	2.61	0.64	2.64	0.68	2.59	0.53
Student-Student Relations	2.56	0.35	2.65	0.33	2.70	0.32
Academic Task	3.14	0.59	3.10	0.57	2.78	0.69
Order/Organization	2.45	0.73	2.30	0.74	2.03	0.54
Social Skills/Student						
Cooperation	1.46	0.34	1.35	0.35	1.38	0.38
Assertion	1.36	0.33	1.38	0.31	1.42	0.32
Empathy	1.44	0.31	1.34	0.29	1.34	0.34
Self-Control	1.09	0.30	1.06	0.32	1.08	0.32
Sociometric						
Preference	0.16	1.61	-0.42	1.56	0.12	1.68
Impact	0.05	1.23	0.17	1.13	0.03	0.86
Social Skills/Teacher						
Cooperation	-	-	1.19	0.48	1.58	0.41
Assertion	-	-	0.83	0.45	1.03	0.51
Self-Control	-	-	1.19	0.37	1.31	0.35
Externalizing Behavior	-	-	0.34	0.43	0.57	0.56
Internalizing Behavior	-	-	0.75	0.56	0.82	0.39

Table 2

Multivariate and Univariate Analysis of Variance

	LD Regular Classroom (n=115) Versus LD Special Classroom (n=112)	LD Regular Classroom (n=115) Versus RS Regular Classroom (n=401)
	Fs Multivariate	
	7.75**	3.61 **
	Fs Univariate	
Classroom Learning Environment		
Teacher-Student Relations	0.27	0.09
Student-Student Relattions	1.21	9.75**
Academik Task	12.05**	0.13
Order/Organization	9.36**	3.25
Social Skills/Student		
Cooperation	0.18	2.78
Assertion	0.50	0.35
Empathy	0.03	6.51**
Self-Control	0.37	0.05
Sociometric		
Preference	6.64**	8.19**
Impact	1.13	0.73
Social Skills/Teacher		
Cooperation	50.77**	-
Assertion	12.16**	-
Self-Control	8.00**	-

Note. RS : Regular Students

* p <.05; ** p<.01